



New Strange Faces! S'pore artists on foreign talent!

13 August

As many have pointed out, Valentine Willie Fine Art's Singapore survey show [New Strange Faces](#) is a hit-and-miss show. But such is the urgency of its topic that, compared to the two previous annual shows, IMHO, it's the most important of the series to date. Some might think it's ironic that such a show is being presented in a private gallery by a Malaysian gallerist, but I don't think so. The distance it affords (in a non-state museum, encouraged by a non-Singaporean) is precisely why we have it.

A slightly condensed version of my write-up appeared in the papers [today](#), with some of the artists I wanted to talk about taken out due to space constraints. Here's the original one.

A day before the opening of the exhibition, visual artist Green Zeng came to Valentine Willie Fine Art gallery with a last-minute creation.

It was a table tennis racquet modified to look like a medal. On its blade were the flags of Singapore and China. It carried the title *FTW*.

More than simply a convenient Internet slang for "for the win", the loaded title also alluded to the female table tennis player — a China-born naturalised Singaporean — whose Olympic victory a couple of weeks ago kickstarted an intense online debate.

"I had the idea after Feng Tianwei won the bronze medal and the divided public reaction to the win inspired me," said Zeng.

Created as a direct and almost immediate response to a timely, hotly contested issue, Zeng's racquet is part of the art gallery's ongoing Singapore survey tackling the idea of the "foreign" and the "foreigner".

Under the unusually phrased title *New Strange Faces*, it's the third instalment of the much-awaited series organised annually by Malaysian gallerist Valentine Willie.

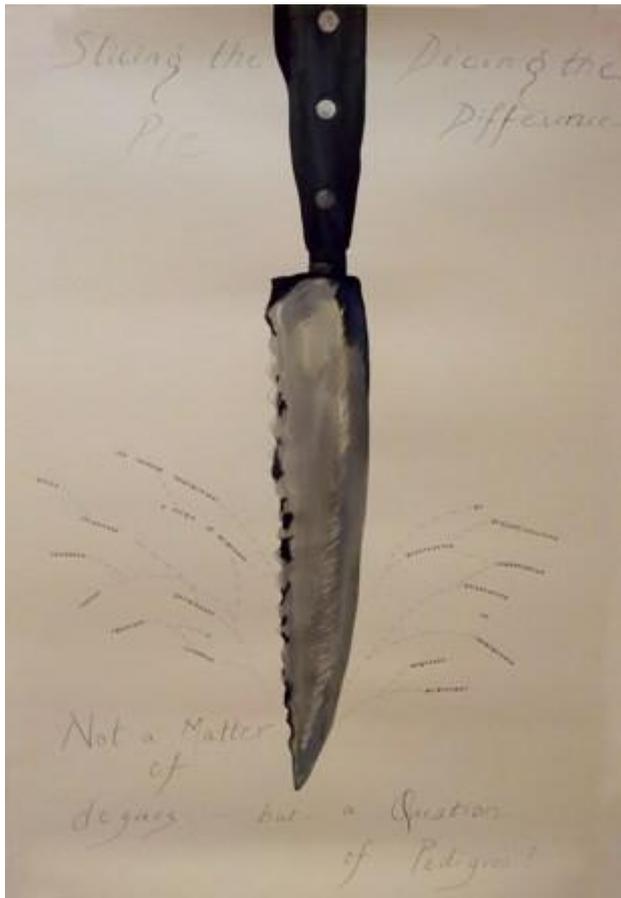
And after provocative shows exploring life *Beyond LKY* and Singapore-Malaysia relationships, the theme behind *New Strange Faces* (apparently taken from former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's comments earlier this year about the presence of foreigners) is perhaps the most pertinent of the lot.

"Since the elections (in 2011), it's all people have been talking about, yet there are no open discussions about it — especially in art," said Willie.

There have occasionally been smaller group shows touching upon the issue, of course, such as the recently-concluded *Auto-Identity*, which included works in collaboration with domestic workers. But perhaps *New Strange Faces*, which comprises works from 21 artists, is the largest to date.

As with VWFA's previous surveys, Willie gives free reign to the participating artists on how to approach the topic and the title — resulting in a wide range of responses.

While a number of works seem merely content to tiptoe around questions of identity and otherness in a general sense, majority gamely take up the challenge directly—albeit in varying degrees of intensity and focus.



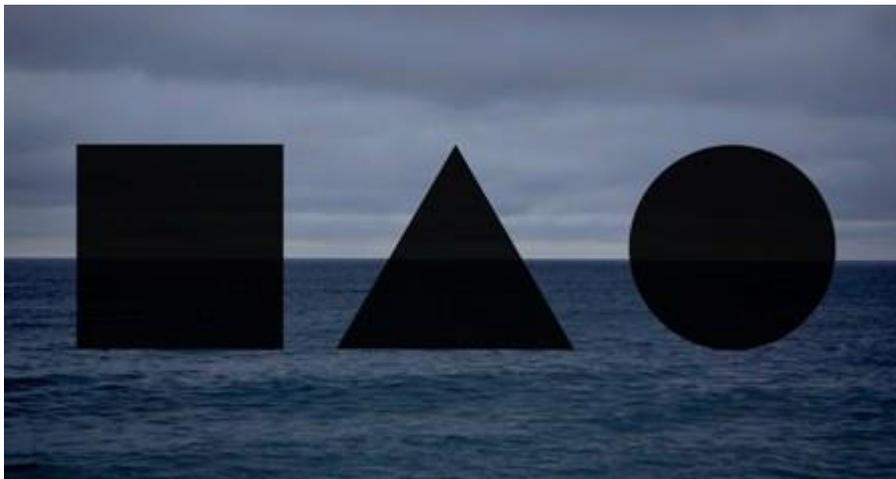
Shubigi Rao

Gentle questions are raised about normalised racial profiling, and the blurring of country composition and identities in the works of Tay Wei Leng, Ang Song Nian and Zakaria Zainal, respectively. In one of Shubigi Rao's works, a huge knife demarcates the two opposing sides of the "FT" issue, peppering it with wordplay.

"New strange faces" is given a more political reading by Kai Lam (who creates *Behind Blue Eyes*, a makeshift hut where one can get a glimpse, through the cracks, of a huge portrait of the late J B Jeyaretnam staring back) and Godwin Koay's watercolour series *Notes From A Revolution*, where he juxtaposes mainstream media headlines with images of chaos. In this fictional world, Koay's images are cautionary tales about what happens when things go too far.



Others, meanwhile, employ myths and codes to great effect. Jimmy Ong's grand drawing *A Sighting Of Singa At Long Ya Men* reconfigures the encounter with a vicious tiger as perhaps, really, an encounter with a native. In his photographs, Jason Wee asks if there is a need to create new symbols to make sense of Singapore, literally arranging geometric shapes superimposed over an ominously calm sea. Genevieve Chua's *Foster Children #1* is of Bedok Reservoir rendered like an ultrasound image. There is a subtle suggestion of the possibility of some new creature emerging from the site where recent deaths have occurred, including those of foreigners.



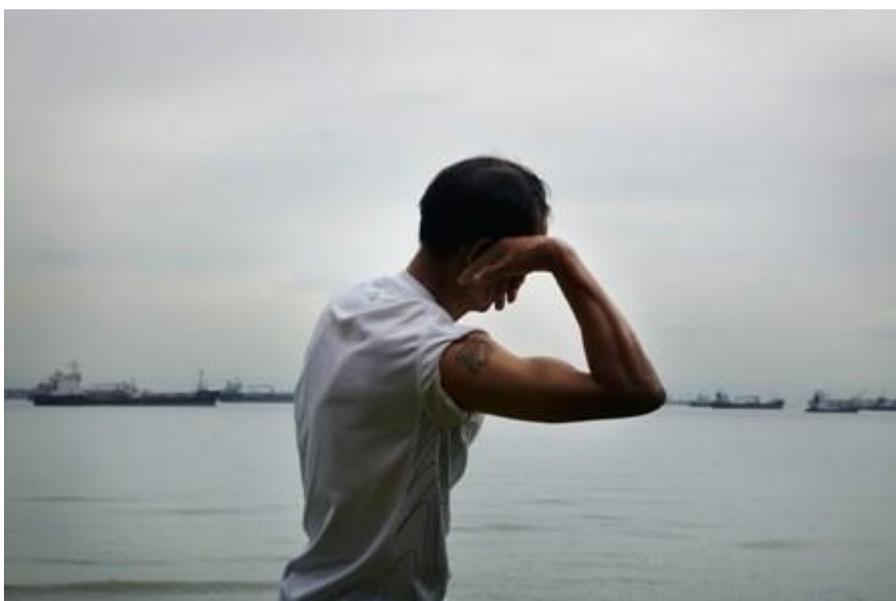
In the works of Jeremy Hiah and Alan Oei, art itself is foregrounded. The former's tongue-in-cheek mixed media work *Natures Mortes After Francis Picabia* (created with his daughter and tipping its hat to the Dada artist) namedrops art market darlings Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Fang Lijun — perhaps not-so-new, not-so-strange faces that loom large in Singapore's desire to become an international art hub. After all, if foreign talents in the fields of business and science are supposedly being opened with open arms, wouldn't the same be said for the arts?

Meanwhile, two of Oei's works tackle mainstream media representation of the hotly debated "Ferrari incident" a while back. In newspaper reports of the incident, photos not pertaining to the news have been painted over, while those that do have been given new life as Oei paints over these as a furious blur of colours. So furious, in fact, that they "leap out" of the pages to become full-blown paintings. The impact and speed, as it were, of the Ferrari as it crashes into the taxi finds perfect expression in the very materiality of paint. The paintings literally are a reaction.



By bringing art into the equation in the clearest possible way, both Hiah and Oei add a refreshing perspective to a group show that collectively still maintains its distance from its subject matter. But perhaps the most potent of the works have been from those that take the completely opposite stance — works where artistic nuance is arguably simplified and issues they speak of become more immediately noticeable.

Aside from his table-tennis paddle, Zeng also puts up a simple warning sign usually seen in construction sites — with the addition of an extra language (Tagalog) to the four other languages. Alecia Neo's poignant series of photographs has, as its central image, a Chinese migrant worker in an almost graceful dance-like pose with the Chinese characters for "tolerance" tattooed on his arm.



Finally, Vivian Lee's video records an interesting family conversation playing over the image of her toddler step-brother, whose mother is Chinese. In this simple work, the nuances of views are played out — and most importantly, literally heard. “My sense of belonging is not in China nor in Singapore — it's this home, wherever it is,” you hear Lee's stepmother say.

New Strange Faces offers no one point of view, no singular response to the touchy issue of foreign immigrants. At times, one wonders if some of the contributors hadn't given more thought in responding not just to a call for a mere survey show of Singapore artists but, indeed, to a national debate that goes beyond those four walls of VWFA.

Those that do, however, have made this a worthwhile, if not pivotal, exhibition. As disparate as their voices are, one is glad that artists have offered their two cents worth.